

Chapter XIII

Online Communities of Inquiry in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this chapter is to explore how online communities of inquiry can be developed to facilitate students to engage in reflective practice. The discussion begins with a critical review of the literature, examining the role of educational technology within higher education and the need to develop pedagogical frameworks for its use in practice. An overview of an action research study is presented that used communities of inquiry to facilitate registered nurses to critically reflect on clinical practice. The preliminary findings from focus group interviews indicate that learners viewed their participation in online communities of inquiry as a beneficial aid to reflection. The chapter concludes with recommendations for practice and for further research in the area of online communities of inquiry.

INTRODUCTION

There has been intense interest and speculation in the ways that technology can be used to support student learning in higher education (Issroff & Scanlon, 2002; Rogers, 2000). Universities are

seeking to integrate technology into classroom teaching practice due to the widespread integration of the Internet into society (Issroff & Scanlon), the expanding capabilities of educational technology (Surry, Ensminger, & Haab, 2005), and ubiquitous personal computing and communica-

tion (McCredie, 2000). Although education has novel technological tools at its disposal, Salmon (2002) cautions that many of these applications are devoid of empirical, instructional, or pedagogical underpinnings to justify their employment. Therefore, it is imperative that educators develop educational theory and practice to guide the utilisation of technology within university teaching practice. In this regard, this chapter examines the role of educational technology within higher education, focusing specifically on how communities of inquiry can be developed within an online environment. The objectives of this chapter are

- to explore the role of technology within higher education,
- to examine what is meant by the term community of inquiry,
- to consider how a community of inquiry can be developed within an e-learning environment, and
- to examine how a community of inquiry can be used to facilitate reflective practice within the context of nurse education.

In addition, this chapter demonstrates how online communities provide a valuable opportunity for educationalists to empirically examine how technology can be utilised in the development of teaching and learning interventions within higher education.

EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

“Let the main object of this, our didactic, be as follows: to seek and to find a method of instruction, by which teachers may teach less, but learners may learn more” (John Amos Cornelius, a 16th century scholar, as cited in Lusty, 1969, p. 53).

Down through the ages, a variety of in-

structional methods have been proposed by educational luminaries, ranging from Socrates, Abelard, Aquinas, and Bell, to Dewey, Montessori, Lewin, and Skinner; however, the search for the perfect method of instruction remains an illusive quest (Lusty, 1969). This quest continues within contemporary higher education, where there is a growing recognition that traditional university teaching methods have served the interests of lecturers and educational institutions more than those of students (Milliken & Barnes, 2002). This disparity has resulted in ever-increasing calls for greater accountability and quality assurance within the realm of educational delivery (Pennington & O’Neill, 1994; Ruth, 1997). In response, several countries have established agencies to develop the teaching function of universities and to explore various mechanisms aimed at examining the scholarship of teaching in academia (Healey, 2003). Traditionally, efforts designed to improve learning in higher education have focused on teaching and the ways in which learning activities are organised. As the international debate develops, significance is being given to understanding the mechanisms by which students learn (Milliken & Barnes). While the process of facilitating effective student learning is multifaceted, educational technology is increasingly being recognised as an instrument that may enhance the teaching and learning transaction (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Laurillard, 1993; Salmon, 2000). Consequently, stakeholders who are interested in improving the quality of teaching in higher education are beginning to look toward new technology as a mechanism through which improvements can be realised.

Academia has responded to the use of ICT by conducting research on how tools such as the computer and the Internet can be used to accelerate university students’ learning, to enhance and democratise access to educational opportunities, and to support interactivity, interaction, and collaboration (Selwyn, 2007). In addition, universities worldwide are investing

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